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## Power and Pursuit: Male & Female Courtship in *Ars Amatoria*

Writings of Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso span the breadth of elegy, epic, and tragedy, but in western literary tradition Ovid remains most recognizable as an ancient poet of love. From Chaucer's "Venus clerk, Ovyde" in *Hous of Fame*<sup>1</sup> to Shakespeare's "Naso... smelling out the odouriferous flowers of fancy" in *Love's Labour's Lost*,<sup>2</sup> Ovid's legacy as the guide to *Ars Amatoria*, the Art of Love, is clear. Contention begins to arise, however, when Ovid's legacy is examined with respect to male and female roles in love. While some recent scholars laud Ovid for addressing both male and female concerns in the three books that comprise *Ars Amatoria*,<sup>3</sup> the more cynical modern eye sees in Ovid's ancient textbook to love the same stock characters that populate archetypal romances throughout the ages. Although Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* is certainly characterized by the same gender stereotypes that persist in much of romantic literature and discourse, the work is in fact better understood as progressive in that it treats male and female roles in courtship as potentially equally powerful, and considers both to be equally worthy of practical and high-level discussion.

It must first be acknowledged that the very different advice Ovid gives to men and women in *Ars Amatoria* does indeed create a clear distinction between the male and female roles

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<sup>1</sup> "Ovid." The Oxford Classical Dictionary.

<sup>2</sup> Holofernes in Act IV, Scene II, *Love's Labour's Lost*

<sup>3</sup> Dutton, U of Johannesburg: "Ovid attempts to convince his audience that persuasion is better than force: not very noble by our modern standards, yet nevertheless a generous step in the direction of gender equality."

in the pursuit of love. From the start of *Ars Amatoria*'s first book, each sex is given a well-defined position in the metaphorical hunt for love: the man is designated as the predator and the woman as the prey. Ovid, not yet fifty lines into his lengthy didactic poem, tells the male reader almost at once to whom he should be looking for a role model in finding the lady he desires: "Well knows the hunter where to spread his nets for the stag, well knows he in what glen the boar with gnashing teeth abides."<sup>4</sup> Even when the references are not so directly animalistic, Ovid minces no words in explaining the active role of the male pursuer relative to the passive female object of passion. His retelling of a portion of the Roman foundation myth, The Rape of the Sabine Women, for example, describes the women being seized as *genialis praeda*,<sup>5</sup> or "spoils for the marriage-couch" who are led off by "wildly rushing men", *viros ruentes*,<sup>6</sup> eager to make wives of the unwilling women.

This same hierarchy is echoed in the third book of *Ars Amatoria*, where Ovid provides advice on erotic desire to women. Although a deeper reading of this final book will provide greater insight into the implications of Ovid advising the young ladies of Rome directly, one can hardly ignore the decidedly passive tone implicit in Ovid's opening statement that he intends to "teach in what way a woman is to be loved."<sup>7</sup> As the book proceeds, Ovid instructs women primarily in how to make themselves more attractive to men, telling them how to dress, how to do their make-up, and how to position themselves ideally during sex. These words of supposed

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<sup>4</sup> Book 1, Lines 45-46: *Scit bene venator, cervis ubi retia tendat./Scit bene, qua frendens valle moretur aper.*

<sup>5</sup> Book 1, Line 125: *Ducuntur raptae, genialis praeda, puellae* – Note the etymological link between *praeda* and the word "prey"

<sup>6</sup> Book 1, Line 119: *Sic illae timuere viros sine more ruentes*

<sup>7</sup> Book 3, Line 28: *Femina praecipiam quo sit amanda modo.*

feminine wisdom stand in sharp contrast to his earlier teachings for men, which focus mainly on strategies for actively cornering young ladies in various locations around the city and winning them over with amorous advances.

With such a strong sense of the proper position for men and women made clear throughout the text, it is understandably difficult to discern the subtle ways in which Ovid in fact grants power to both the male and female forces of love. In order to perceive these aspects of *Ars Amatoria*, one must consider the first book and the last in parallel, taking particular note of how each piece of advice gives exclusive control to neither the man nor the woman. Consider first, for example, the initial call for a man in pursuit of love to act as a hunter with a spear levelled at his female prey.

Throughout the *Ars Amatoria*, the metaphor of the hunter is extended more widely to one of love as war, with the male soldier, armed by Ovid, portrayed as fighting to catch and win the prize of a woman.<sup>8</sup> Although this would seem to play into the trope of the masculine aggressor of love, in fact Ovid complicates this idea early in *Ars Amatoria*, introducing the notion that such weapons may not be as powerful or exclusive as they first appear. For example, the man uneducated in love is initially referred to as a soldier “for the first time come to fight in warfare new”<sup>9</sup>, implying that his previous “military” experience is perhaps not so suited to the more nuanced combat of love. Later, Ovid makes the risks of mixing metaphorical arms with erotic desire even more apparent, describing how watching a gladiatorial show in the presence of a young lady can have an all too real an emotional impact:

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<sup>8</sup> Book 1, Line 131-132 *Romule, militibus scisti dare commoda solus./Haec mihi si dederis commoda, miles ero.*

<sup>9</sup> Book 1, Line 36: *Qui nova nunc primum miles in arma venis*

Often has Venus' Boy fought upon that sand, and he who watched the wounds has himself been wounded. While he is speaking and touching her hand...he feels the winged barb and groans with the wound, and is himself part of the show which he is watching.<sup>10</sup>

Thus it is clear that in Ovid's eyes, men are no more immune to the injuries of love's weapons than women; he who takes up the weapons that Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* provides is yet powerless to resist their blows. Even the poet himself, for all that he insists that "to me Love shall yield",<sup>11</sup> admits that "Love has pierced and branded me",<sup>12</sup> indicating that love wields arms against men as well as it furnishes weapons for them.

More telling yet is the fact that Ovid does not restrict the military metaphor to men. At the beginning of the third book, he explains that he writes to women because "It were not just that defenseless maids should fight with armed men"<sup>13</sup>. He claims that such a victory would be shameful to men as well as women, and his attitude makes plain that, having given instruction to the menfolk of Rome, he feels womankind should not be left without ways and wiles of their own. Humorously, Ovid even chides the men who would complain the he allows women to "go into battle on equal terms"<sup>14</sup>, saying that they worry needlessly that he will "betray the sheepfold to the mad she-wolf"<sup>15</sup> and that they should "let each woman be judged on her own merits"<sup>16</sup>. Although the equitable approach that Ovid claims is perhaps achieved with only measured

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<sup>10</sup> Book 1, Lines 165-170: *Illa saepe puer Veneris pugnavit harena,/qui spectavit vulnera, vulnus habet...*

<sup>11</sup> Book 1, Line 21: *Et mihi cedit Amor.*

<sup>12</sup> Book 1, Line 23: *Quo me fixit Amor, quo me violentius ussit*

<sup>13</sup> Book 3, Lines 5-6: *Non erat armatis aequum concurrere nudas;/Sic etiam vobis vincere turpe, viri.*

<sup>14</sup> Book 3, Line 3: *Ite in bella pares*

<sup>15</sup> Book 3, Line 7-8: "*quid virus in angues Adicis, et rabidae tradis ovile lupae?*" – "Why do you add gall to serpents, and betray the sheepfold to the mad she-wolf?"

success, his bold statements make clear that it is at least the aim of *Ars Amatoria* to make men and women equal combatants in Love.

Beyond these initial broad declarations of purpose, the specific advice that Ovid provides to men and women is often more balanced between the sexes than it may first appear. Take, for example, Ovid's insistence that men ought to use deception in their pursuit of women. Wily as ever, Ovid encourages his male reader to string his female lover along with empty promises, reminding him "what harm is there in promises? In promises anyone can be rich."<sup>17</sup> The ancient poet focuses especially on teaching the young man how to avoid buying things for his beloved at all costs, remarking that the clever lover should always appear on the point of giving his girl a present, but never actually give her anything lest she take the gift and forget about him: "thus many a time has a barren field deceived its owner."<sup>18</sup>

The voice of deception yet again, Ovid also provides advice on composing letters that will win over the most reluctant of young ladies. He suggests at once that any intense expression of true feelings would be foolish, since "Who, save an idiot, would declaim to his tender sweetheart?"<sup>19</sup> Ovid instead recommends that the enamored young man use letters to manipulate the object of his affection into reciprocating his desires. "Your language should inspire trust and your words be familiar, yet coaxing too"<sup>20</sup> Ovid counsels Roman men, without any apparent concern for the women receiving the cajoling missives. Initially, this seems to be an instance of

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<sup>16</sup> Book 3, Line 10: *Spectetur meritis quaeque puella suis.* – "Let each woman be judged by her own merits"

<sup>17</sup> Book 1, Line 443: *Promittas facito: quid enim promittere laedit?*

<sup>18</sup> Book 1, Line 450: *Sic dominum sterilis saepe fefellit ager.*

<sup>19</sup> Book 1, Line 465: *Quis, nisi mentis inops, tenerae declamat amicae?*

<sup>20</sup> Book 1, 467-468: *Sit tibi credibilis sermo consuetaque verba,/Blanda tamen, praesens ut videre loqui.*

Ovid yet again favoring the masculine interest over the feminine in the art of love; however, in the third book we learn that deception plays an even greater role, and offers a potentially much greater source of power, for young ladies looking for love.

Where men are offered the recourse of empty promises and fictitious gifts, to women Ovid provides the trickery of manipulating one's own appearance to hide flaws and win over gullible men. As the author of another text dedicated entirely to the feminine science of applying makeup,<sup>21</sup> Ovid suggests devices of every kind to the young ladies eager to make themselves seem more beautiful. For the dark skinned lady, Ovid prescribes a dash of face powder; for she who is small of stature, he recommends reclining on a couch with a robe draped over the feet; the slender woman is advised to wear loose, textured garments, and the girl with fat fingers is told to avoid gesturing with her hands in conversation.<sup>22</sup> Although these tricks of appearance may seem ultimately more in the interest of pleasing men than women, Ovid's true intent shows through when he provides even more mendacious tips on letter-writing and more for the ladies, making clear that in *Ars Amatoria*, the female party is just as capable of exerting deceptive control over romantic interactions.

One is almost moved to pity for the boys of Ovid's first book when, in book three, he lets women in on the secrets of how to respond to their lovers' letters. Telling them to examine the letter with care in order to "gather from the words themselves whether he is feigning,"<sup>23</sup> Ovid instructs the intelligent girl to delay writing back, since "delay ever spurs lovers on"<sup>24</sup> and to

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<sup>21</sup> "Ovid." The Oxford Classical Dictionary.

<sup>22</sup> Book 3, Lines 263-276: *Si brevis es, sedeas, ne stans videare sedere:/Inque tuo iaceas quantulacumque toro.*

<sup>23</sup> Book 3, Line 471-472: *Quodque leges, ex ipsis collige verbis,/Fingat*

<sup>24</sup> Book 3, Lines 473-474: *Postque brevem rescribe moram: mora semper amantes/Incitat*

ensure that she “cause him to hope and fear together”<sup>25</sup> so that he will hang on her every word when she does deign to respond. This image of the aloof young lady, calculatedly allowing her lover to languish, extends far beyond the realm of letter writing. Ovid, admitting that he commits treason against his own sex,<sup>26</sup> tells his female readers:

What is easily given ill fosters an enduring love; let an occasional repulse vary your merry sport. Let him lie before your gate; let him cry, “Ah, cruel door!” and play the suppliant oft.<sup>27</sup>

Although the pursuer’s role is generally supposed to be the more powerful, Ovid shows here that the prey is not without her own particular power over the hunter; she is able to play with his emotions with apparent ease by introducing a rival to share her couch,<sup>28</sup> or by inventing here “the surly guardianship of a pretended slave” and there “the irksome vigilance of a husband”.<sup>29</sup> Thus when it comes to making use of deception in love, Ovid concludes that it is the women who employ the art with more skill, triumphing over the very men who seek to deceive them.

Perhaps more problematic than Ovid’s cynical words of advice, which at least seem to be addressed to male and female readers with equal vitriol, are his undisguised criticisms of women in the first book of *Ars Amatoria* and beyond. Towards the end of the section advising men on how to avoid giving gifts, for example, Ovid states that “ten mouths and as many tongues would

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<sup>25</sup> Book 3, Line 477: *Fac timeat speretque simul*

<sup>26</sup> Book 3, Line 578: *Et sit in infida prodicione fides.* – “And in faithless treason let us keep faith.”

<sup>27</sup> Book 3, Lines 579-582: *Quod datur ex facili, longum male nutrit amorem:/Miscenda est laetis rara repulsa iocis...*

<sup>28</sup> Book 3, Line 593-594: *Postmodo rivalem partitae foedera lecti/Sentiat: has artes tolle, senescet amor.*—“Neglect these devices, and his love will wane.”

<sup>29</sup> Book 3, Lines 601-602: *Incitat et ficti tristis custodia servi,/Et nimium duri cura molesta viri.*

not suffice me to tell the unholy ruses of the fair.”<sup>30</sup> Only a particularly charitable interpretation of the word *meretricum* allows for “of the fair” to replace the more literally translated “of the whores”.<sup>31</sup> Later, when telling men that they need to pretend to be deeply in love with even the least desired of the females they pursue, Ovid explains that this should not be hard since “each woman thinks herself lovable; hideous though she be, there is none her own looks do not please.”<sup>32</sup> Although these crass insults may seem to have no direct comparison in the final book of *Ars Amatoria*, it is simply with more subtle strokes that Ovid depicts the equally numerous faults of men when he addresses women.

The primary insult that Ovid levels against the masculine in the third book of *Ars Amatoria* is that of weakness. Nearing the end of his three book didactic poem, Ovid, questioning his own sanity, reveals how a woman versed in the art of erotic desire can “slay”<sup>33</sup> any man she picks: “Make us (and it is easy) believe we are loved.”<sup>34</sup> Men are shown here as falling prey to the merest claim of love, suggesting, if not directly, that they too are affected by the same vanity that supposedly leads all women to believe themselves desirable. Ovid even returns to the metaphor of the hunter and hunted, reversing the roles to chastise himself for revealing this male weakness to his female students in the way of love: “The bird does not show

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<sup>30</sup> Book 1, Lines 435-436: *Non mihi, sacrilegas meretricum ut persequar artes;/Cum totidem linguis sint satis ora decem.*

<sup>31</sup> “Meretrix.” The New College Latin/English Dictionary.’

<sup>32</sup> Book 1, Lines 613-614: *Nec credi labor est: sibi quaeque videtur amanda;/Pessima sit, nulli non sua forma placet.*

<sup>33</sup> Book 3, Line 672: *Gladios in mea fata dabo.* – “I will give the swords to slay me.”

<sup>34</sup> Book 3, Line 674: *Efficite (et facile est), ut nos credamus amari.*

the fowlers where it may be hunted; the hind does not teach the enemy hounds to run.”<sup>35</sup> Thus Ovid admits, if in decidedly less critical language, that men in love are possessed by the same flaws in reasoning and lack of self-awareness that he had previously pointed out as faults unique to women.

Despite the differences in tone and treatment that undeniably characterize Ovid’s amorous advice for men and women, it has now been made overwhelmingly clear that Ovid in fact strikes a subtle balance between the power of male and female roles in the pursuit of love. Beyond the specifics of the advice he provides in his influential textbook of love, however, Ovid breaks from tradition at an even deeper level in *Ars Amatoria* by providing a serious and practical guide to love for both sexes. Although steeped in humor and focused with a critical eye on the social milieu of contemporary Rome, Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* must ultimately be taken not as a work of parody or satire, but as a true piece of didactic literature. This is one of Ovid’s key innovations in *Ars Amatoria*; for the male art of love and the female alike, Ovid deftly applies serious didactic elements to what many assume he considers nothing more than an entertaining and lighthearted subject.

Consider, for example, the type of imagery Ovid repeatedly uses to lead his reader from one section of the poem to the next. Harkening back to metaphors found in such mainstays of the genre as Vergil’s *Georgics*<sup>36</sup> and Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*,<sup>37</sup> Ovid speaks of each transition

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<sup>35</sup> Book 3, Lines 669-670: *Non avis aucupibus monstrat, qua parte petatur:/Non docet infestos currere cervae canes.*

<sup>36</sup> Vergil’s *Georgics*, Book 4: “And I myself, were I not even now/Furling my sails, and, nigh the journey’s end, /Eager to turn my vessel’s prow to shore, /Perchance would sing...”

<sup>37</sup> Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, Book 6: “The most I have unravelled; what remains/Do thou take in, besides; since once for all /To climb into that chariot’ renowned...”

in *Ars Amatoria* as if he were guiding a vessel or vehicle rather than an aimless lover. In the first book, Ovid opens by explaining to young men that “by skill nimble chariots are driven: by skill must Love be guided,”<sup>38</sup> and concludes his address with the statement: “Here let the anchor be thrown, and hold my bark secure.”<sup>39</sup> When speaking to women, Ovid propels the narrative with words of a similar kind, asking at times that his muse, Venus, “draw in the reins... nor dash headlong with ungoverned wheels,”<sup>40</sup> and at others begging her to let him “spread out full my swelling sails.”<sup>41</sup> This language, as familiar to readers of Dante as scholars of ancient Latin texts,<sup>42</sup> places Ovid’s work securely in the tradition of didactic literature and makes him the clear leader on the metaphorical journey of love.

Although it is thus well established that Ovid is not without respect for certain key elements of literary convention, throughout the text one finds that the ancient poet subverts the rules of his chosen genre as often as he adheres to them. Most notably, Ovid neglects to use hexameter, the usual meter for didactic poems, but rather utilizes the same elegiac couplets he employed in *Amores*, the series of erotic poems that represent his earliest known work.<sup>43</sup> The customs of love poetry are not fully respected in *Ars Amatoria* either, however; whereas earlier romantic poets, such as Catullus, had primarily made their own erotic exploits the subject of their

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<sup>38</sup> Book 1, Line 4: *Arte leves currus: arte regendus amor.*

<sup>39</sup> Book 1, Line 772: *Hic teneat nostras ancora iacta rates.*

<sup>40</sup> Book 3, Line 467-468: *Supprime habenas,/Musa, nec admissis excutiare rotis.*

<sup>41</sup> Book 3, Lines 499-500: *Plenaque curvato pandere vela sinu* – “And spread out full my swelling sails”

<sup>42</sup> Dante’s *Paradiso*, Canto II, Lines 1-2 “All ye, who in small bark have following sail’d,/Eager to listen, on the advent’rous track...”

<sup>43</sup> “Ovid.” The Oxford Classical Dictionary.

verses, Ovid irreverently reverses the roles and speaks instead directly to the reader about his or her own erotic affairs.

Addressing the love-struck boys of book one, for example, Ovid follows up the classic myth of Dionysus and Ariadne not with a personal anecdote about wine and love, but rather with detailed instructions for seducing women at parties, including the best methods for pretending to befriend their husbands. Women's sexual concerns are dealt with in even more explicit terms at the end of book three, where Ovid explains how ladies of various shape and stature should arrange themselves during intercourse:

A small woman should ride astride; because she was tall, his Theban bride never sat Hector like a horse. A woman whose long flanks deserve to be seen should press the coverlets with her knees, her neck bent backward somewhat. If her thighs be youthful and her breasts without blemish, her lover should stand, and she herself lie slantwise.<sup>44</sup>

Although passages of this kind are admittedly uncommon even in *Ars Amatoria*, and can hardly rival the crassness of Catullus, Ovid's boldness in involving the reader in the sexual acts he describes was notable even in Roman times. It is often suggested that Ovid's exile, which he attributes to *carmen et error*, "a poem and a mistake", was at least partially justified by his controversial treatment of sexual matters in *Ars Amatoria*.<sup>45</sup>

With the seemingly contradictory facts of Ovid's literary and crude attitude towards erotic desire in *Ars Amatoria* now established, we begin to approach the fundamental paradox of

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<sup>44</sup> Book 3, Lines 777-782: *Parva vehatur equo: quod erat longissima, numquam/Thebaïs Hectoreo nupta resedit equo.*

<sup>45</sup> "Ovid." The Oxford Classical Dictionary: "This newly direct implication of the Roman reader in the erotic text made the *Ars* the poem most likely to be picked on when the climate turned unfavourable to Ovid's work."

his work, and perhaps the more general irony inherent to writing about love. Recalling Plato's *Symposium*, among the first Western works written about erotic desire, one must note that the highest level of discourse, Socrates' speech about transcendent spiritual love, resolves immediately with the bathos of Alcibiades' drunken rant about spurned affection.<sup>46</sup> Thus it seems that it is ultimately impossible to address matters of love with absolute seriousness; if this is believed, then Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* is perhaps best understood as a philosophic work that throws the contrast into even sharper relief. Whether or not one reads his work in the context of the Platonic canon, however, it is clear that Ovid develops an innovative stance on erotic desire that he applies to both men and women in the course of *Ars Amatoria*.

For all that inequality undeniably underlies the treatment of male and female courtship in *Ars Amatoria*, the assumption that this makes it a work of nothing but tired stereotypes and clichés falls apart when one examines the details of Ovid's didactic poem more closely. The specific nuances of the advice that Ovid gives to men and women, as well as the ways in which Ovid more generally goes against the conventions of genre and propriety, indicate that a more complex understanding of *Ars Amatoria*'s attitude towards male and female roles in love must be developed. As the poet himself confirms in the final words of the text, it is ultimately the aim of *Ars Amatoria* to teach two equally powerful forms of a single art. Ovid, having armed readers of both sexes with authoritative advice on a subject that has frustrated philosophers and lovers alike through the ages, concludes thus: "As once the youths, so now let the women, my votaries, write upon their spoils, NASO WAS OUR MASTER."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Plato's *Symposium*, page 494

<sup>47</sup> Book 3, Lines 811-812: *Ut quondam iuvenes, ita nunc, mea turba, puellae/Inscribant spoliis "NASO MAGISTER ERAT."*



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